

Perfect

by Astrid Goes For A Spin

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Summary: "Every Christmas, we celebrate her memory. But this year, we have other things to celebrate as well." Astrid, Hiccup, Toothless, and Stoick spend a quiet Friday evening together, including homework, Hiccup napping, takeout Chinese, and putting together an artificial Christmas tree. MODERN, same universe as Candid.

Perfect

**\*\*Okay, so, prepare for my extremely long author's note.\*\***

**\*\*Reconghost5 reviewed my other modern story, Candid, a few months ago, asking for some background. Since I'm nowhere near creative enough to come up with an entire parallel to the movie in this universe, I'm leaving most of the details open to interpretation, but he did spark an interest here. I might expand it to a little mini-series. (This is actually the first story I'm writing in one of my own pre-written universes...it was weird.) \*\***

**\*\*In my own brain, there are three HTTYD universes I like to switch between. The first is the old fandom - it goes from HTTYD1 to GoNF, then cuts off. In my mind, his mother is Valhallarama, she died from the same illness that took out most of Hiccup's generation (we've pondered the reason why there are only six teenagers on the entire island over at SaS), and sometime in the near future Hiccup and Astrid get married and live happily ever after, leading relatively boring (but exciting enough for stories; not movies, but stories) lives.\*\***

**\*\*My second universe extends to DoB - I don't approve of the show most of the time, but sometimes I include it in my universe.\*\***

**\*\*My third universe goes from HTTYD1 to HTTYD2, and excludes RoB and DoB, just because I don't like them. Therefore, Valka is the mom,**

(ugh), totally alive, Hiccup likes to try gliding, dragon racing exists, and Eret-son-of-Eret is a thing. (Man?）\*\*

\*\*Now, the things you'll want to know before reviewing about this:  
\*\*

Dragons exist in this (Candid's and Perfect's) universe. They exist in much the same way as the movie, but, obviously, what with modern technology, they're not as big a deal. Think along the lines of \_How to Train Your Marching Band.\_

\*\*Yes, I know that knife-throwing is not an actual sport. In this universe, it is, and Astrid's a pro. Along with ice hockey, which is the most violent sport I could think of that required shoulder pads. Between the weapons/sports, everybody on Berk (at Berk? I haven't decided if it's an island or a town yet) is fairly happy with their modes of physical exertion.\*\*

\*\*They go to school. Real school. With academics. Weapons are a strictly off-campus kind of thing, and the parents are more than capable of picking up the slack. \*\*

\*\*So...I think that's it. Brace yourselves, if you've suffered through my author's note, for five thousand words of family!fluffiness.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>He doesn't invite her in, but she comes in anyway.<p>

"Thanks, Mr. Haddock," Astrid pants, kicking her leather boots to the small rug by the door and hanging up her rain-drenched jacket on the wooden peg next to that ever-present brown fleece vest. She peers out of the doorway and then pushes it shut, wrinkling her nose. "It's starting to sleet."

Stoick carefully peeks between the blinds next to the front door, looking at the beat-up blue bike (finagled right up next to his door, leaning on one wheel to stay out of the storm), complete with the yellow-and-red streamers from childhood poking out of the handlebars. They stick to the bars of the bike as the sleet comes down.

"Feel free to stay as long as you like, Astrid," he invites belatedly, retreating back down the hallway toward the kitchen/living room combo. The kitchen table is covered completely with his paperwork, bills and invoices scattered in piles, but he clears a small space for Astrid at Hiccup's end of the table.

Astrid swings by the little "L" of couches first, stopping to observe the scene â€" Hiccup facing the TV; he must have been sitting on the couch originally, but had, at some point, slid farther and farther down until only his neck is barely vertical, legs over Toothless's back â€" the way a normal human might kick their feet up on a coffee table. Toothless, curled close to the couch, lifts his head from the floor to watch her enter.

"Hey, Toothless," she says quietly, careful not to disturb Hiccup's sleep, hair sticking straight up from sliding down the couch, t-shirt and shorts wrinkled and kind of adorable. She lays a hand on Toothless's head in greeting, and Toothless rustles his wings,

getting in a more comfortable position and settling his head back onto the floor, as if there is no place he'd rather be than elevating Hiccup's legs.

Astrid tiptoes around to the side of the couch, grabbing Hiccup's discarded math book and some unused lined paper, and flipping to the day's homework assignment.

She and Stoick work comfortably for a few minutes, Astrid knocking out math problems for her own homework (not cheating off Hiccup's half-finished, she tells Stoick clearly) steadily, Stoick reading papers that once lived in fine-print envelopes. Astrid is used to Stoick's irritated hand gestures, but after he barely restrains himself from ripping a letter in half, she has to look up.

"Health insurance," he growls, and both of their heads turn at the same speed to the snoozing Hiccup. Astrid notices suddenly that he has Christmas-tree socks on — his foot looking impossibly small in it, the non-foot-shaped prosthetic looking ridiculous.

"He —" he's not going to \_walk \_with the sock, right?" Astrid knows it's serious, that Hiccup doesn't have enough coordination to stop from slipping, and a fall could be dangerous, but it comes out almost like a giggle. The whole right side of her face twitches.

Stoick rolls his eyes. "Doesn't intend on it." They make eye contact, and both of them snort. "He'll forget, though, one of these days. For now, he says it's for the reptile's sake."

Toothless's ears perk up at this, and Astrid stifles another laugh. "Umm, how?"

"Doesn't want his back to be cold," Stoick explains, and Toothless shoots him a very mean look, daring him to insult Hiccup again, but the three of them all know the threat has no weight — no one in the room wants to risk Hiccup waking up, not when the rest he actually gets is so infrequent.

"So, uh, you were saying, health insurance?" Astrid tries to stop her giggling and plants herself firmly in Hiccup's chair, facing the math.

"Unfortunately, one of the occupational hazards of being mayor is that there isn't a union to back me and my claims up," Stoick says heavily, then raises an eyebrow at Astrid's smile.

"You sound like Hiccup," she explains. "You know, 'occupational hazards,' and all."

"The insurance is unlimited," Stoick continues. "But when they say that, they don't expect something like — well, \_Hiccup\_, to change the plan."

"He has a way of doing that," Astrid grins, setting down Hiccup's calculator. "What, too expensive for them or something?"

"Or something." He rubs a hand over his eyebrows. "It's a lasting injury," he says finally.

"So is Toothless's," Astrid counters immediately, feeling compelled

to rise to their defense.

"Toothless's insurance is an even bigger headache than I'm willing to deal with right now," Stoick tries to end the conversation.

"Yeah," Astrid reminisces dreamily. "Do you remember the way he almost killed the nurse who tried to separate him and Hiccup, right after it happened?"

Stoick's the one smiling broadly now. "The lizard's growing on me, lass. Don't tell Hiccup I said that," he adds at the last second.

"Don't worry," she grins. "He knows."

"Hospital bills are covered," Stoick explains, ignoring her comment completely, "But I don't know where I'm going to come up with the money for whenever he breaks that leg and needs a new one." In a more joking tone, "I've mostly given up hope he'll ever grow enough to need another."

"Is that likely?" Astrid asks nervously, shooting the snoozing Hiccup another look. "That he'll break it? So soon, I mean?"

Stoick shrugs his huge shoulders, and both of them are quiet. Astrid finishes the math and carefully folds his paper back into the correct page, leaving calculator and pencil with it. She disappears for a few minutes, then returns from Hiccup's bedroom with the history textbook and a yellow legal pad, not having risked bringing her own school things through the weather.

"I hate history," she comments conversationally after a few minutes of staring into her dense, ballpoint-pen-blue notes. "People just make the same dumb mistakes over and over. It's so \_frustrating.\_" Then, half-kidding, "At least Hiccup's mistakes are brand-spanking-new."

Stoick shrugs again. "Can't say I disagree. I spent too much time out there on the rink back when I was in high school to care too much for the past."

Astrid grins, and they both know perfectly well that if not for Hiccup's influence, she would be out there now, trying to round up people to shoot at her goal, even in the sleet. She shivers at the thought of the icy rain creeping down her collar, which always seems to happen, even with the shoulder pads, and looks back over at Hiccup.

It's getting cold in the house, and Astrid, eager to prolong her exposure to more French Revolution, hops up again to go rummaging in Hiccup's room.

She ends up just dragging the whole comforter off his bed, Stoick watching and chortling. "Need help with that, lass?"

"Nope," she tosses over her shoulder cheerily, trying and failing to keep it all in her arms without dragging on the less-than-immaculate floor.

She dumps it over Hiccup, whose eyebrows unconsciously contract as

the mass of blanket swamps him instantly. She tries not to laugh as she attempts to locate him underneath all the air pockets and smooth it out to cover him. Toothless croons appreciatively as she lays it over some of his back too.

Stoick's bills are becoming more and more tidy as he signs things and licks stamps and clears the table. Astrid starts to feel uncomfortable, and it's when the piles are finished Stoick finally says what she's been dreading.

"Astridâ€|"

"Yep?"

Instead of leveling her that stare, Stoick stands and moves toward the phone in the corner, flipping through a small spiral-bound, top-flight reporter's notebook with scribbled numbers in every direction. He finds the page he needs and takes the phone into his hand, then turns to look at her.

"It's Friday night, Astrid."

"Yep, I know," Astrid says softly.

"What are you doing here?"

It's Astrid's turn to shrug, her soft blue sweater suddenly chafing roughly and uncomfortably at her shoulders as she heats up. "Checking up on Hiccup."

"The truth, Astrid. You saw him when school let out four hours ago."

She looks at the floor. "A lot can change in four hours. Do you want me to leave? Because â€" because, I will-"

"No, lass â€" it's Friday night, next week is the last of the semester, and instead of out â€" out doing whatever teenagers do nowadays, or starting fistfights at the rink, you're here discussing bills in my kitchen."

"I like to be here, okay?" Astrid says, defensive. "It's not like I'm playing tonight, it's almost Christmas."

"And homework? On a Friday night?"

"I wanted to do my homework with Hiccup," Astrid says clearly. "It's easier, but, then, I didn't want to leave, even though he was asleep, and, well â€" I like â€" this." She gestures at the kitchen â€" her and Stoick, working together, the light in the kitchen shining out into the sleet beating against the windows. Toothless, lying contentedly on the floor, and Hiccup, napping calmly.

At this, Stoick seems to accept her answer, nodding his acknowledgement with a genuine smile. "I like this too."

Astrid almost expects there to be more to the conversation, but instead, he just looks at the page in the scruffy notebook â€" something in Hiccup's handwriting, she sees â€" and types a phone number.

"Yes, New Century? It's Stoick. Are you still sending people out in this onslaught?" A pause, and then Stoick gives a hearty laugh. "That's my man. Yes, the usual " six egg rolls, a quart of the soup, spare ribs, white rice, General Tso's, and then add a pint of the boneless spare ribs. Got it? See you in ten."

"They're actually sending someone out in this?" Astrid asks incredulously, waving an arm at the window.

"Ah, Fred'll be fine, he's tough," Stoick says bracingly.

"You're ordering Chinese from a guy called \_Fred\_?"

"No," Stoick corrects delicately, "We're ordering Chinese from a guy called Fred. Who do you think all that boneless was for? And he'll be here in ten minutes, so you'd best try to wake him up." He indicates the couch, as if he could have possibly meant someone else.

"Me?" Astrid squeaks. "Why " why not you?"

"Well," Stoick chuckles, "He generally seems more pleased to see you than me, if you catch my drift." The wink is the most infuriating thing she's ever witnessed in her life.

Blushing furiously, Astrid sends a glare toward him as he moves out of the room toward the garage and she picks her way closer to the couch. She debates between standing in front " wait, Toothless is there, not an option " or sitting next to him, or peeking over from behind. She chooses the last, and leans way over, one leg in the air, the other's toes ready to tip her onto the couch if she so tries. Toothless lifts his head curiously, eyes wide as he takes in her maneuver.

She shakes his thin shoulder. "Hiccup?" His eyebrows contract even more, lips pursing. "Hiccup, wake up. Chinese will be here in ten minutes."

He doesn't wake up. Toothless shifts, carefully lowering Hiccup's legs from his back to Toothless's forearms and raising his head to Hiccup's level, making a soft purring noise.

"Hiccup? You're not going to make us wake you up to the smell of General Tso's chicken, are you?"

This finally seems to rouse him, nose wrinkling into an expression of distaste. "Are you kidding me? I was hoping it was Saturday morning already." His eyelids flutter open, and his hand shoots to his neck with a wince. "Ah, God. I'm gonna feel that when it's actually morning."

It's only then that he notices her face so close to his, bangs and braid hanging. "Astrid, why are you in my house?"

"Checking up on you," she repeats, trying to sound truthful.

Hiccup glances toward the microwave clock as he sits slowly up, massaging his lower back. "You saw me four hours ago," he echoes. "What did you think was going to happen?"

"With you, we never know," Astrid tells him seriously. "But really, Fred's going to be here in ten minutes, and it's going to be kind of unfortunate if we made him bike all the way here in the sleet and you're in the mood for Cinnamon Toast Crunch instead of General Tso's."

"I am always in the mood for General Tso's," he says, face perfectly straight. "But seriously, what are you doing here?"

He gets up slowly, using Toothless's head to support him as he slowly makes his way out of the carpeted living room toward the linoleum kitchen. "Watch out!" She barely has time to reach helplessly toward him before the stupid Christmas sock skids and he tips.

Toothless catches him easily, glaring at Astrid reproachfully for doubting his ability to protect Hiccup. "Thanks, Bud," Hiccup breathes, sinking into his chair. And then looking down at it, apparently puzzled. "Did-"

"I've been keeping your chair warm for you," Astrid says awkwardly.

"I see." Then, noticing his textbook and her copious notes, "Did you just come over here to use my textbook for the homework that's due Tuesday?" Something hits him. "Did you lose yours?"

"I came to check up on you," she says for what feels like the millionth time that evening even though it's only the third. "And I'd biked all the way here, and it felt like a waste to go all the way back after it started sleeting, and you were stupid enough to fall asleep at five o'clock, and I figured I might as well get something done, and-"

"The Astrid Hofferson I know has never minded the occasional bit of sleet," he says accusingly. Astrid directs his attention to the window, walking smoothly over and hauling up the blinds ("Oh.") and then letting them drop. "I was asleep for just two hours?" He stretches, trying and failing to pop his back. "I actually feel good. I should do that more often."

"Sleep?"

"Nap with Toothless," he clarifies.

"Toothless wasn't sleeping," she informs him smugly. "More like eavesdropping on your dad's and my conversation about you."

"Yeah, yeah, I know I'm an endlessly interesting subject," Hiccup yawns, putting her papers on top of his textbook and shoving it to the other side of the table. "And I'm really not in the mood for homework right now."

"Good. Neither am I."

Silence makes Astrid uncomfortable, and silence with Hiccup isn't the same as silence with Stoick. With Stoick, they're both usually focused on separate tasks. With Hiccup, if they aren't talking, she can practically hear the gears in his head turning. She sits at the only extra chair at the table.

"Soooâ€¦it's Friday night," he says eventually, apparently having come to whatever conclusion. "What's standing in your way of kicking some serious ice-hockey butt?"

"No game today," she explains, caught between dispirited and content. "I've been having a nice time with your dad, though."

Hiccup doesn't seem to know how to react to this news, and finally he says, "Uhâ€¦okay. Goodâ€¦good for you?"

"How come he knows I like boneless spare ribs?" The question comes out more accusatorily than she wanted, and she cringes just like Hiccup, wanting to grab the sentence and stuff it back into her mouth.

"Beeecause you told me you like boneless spare ribs?"

She's more ashamed than she should be at his careful tone. "Oh. I don't remember. When?"

"Uhhâ€¦sometime post-Toothless?"

"Safe bet," she agrees.

"Sooâ€¦"

"Yep. Fred should be here soon."

"Fred wanted to come out in this sleet? Are you serious? You couldn't pay me to step outside right now."

Astrid gets up to take another peek outside, and hops back from the window as something whaps it, hard. "I think that's hail, now, actually," she informs him over her shoulder, coming to sit, then changing her mind and leaning on the back of the couch instead.

"What a difference." He rolls his eyes.

"Well, I wouldn't want to be biking in it. I don't know why they don't deliver in cars."

"You know," he says, almost shyly, "Once you get through the bad clouds like this, going straight up, it's calm above them. Really nice. Now it'd be all moonlit and quiet."

"Really?" She almost suggests that they go, right now, but holds herself back as Hiccup reaches below the table and starts wiggling the sock off his prosthetic with a wince. "Is it the sofa-ruined back, or the leg?"

"Would you believe me if I say both? I feel like an old man," he grumbles.

"Um, cold weather got you again?" She wishes that came out more sympathetic, but it's too late now.

"I hate summer because it's hot, and I loathe hot weather, and I now hate winter because it hurts," he says dryly. "I'm doomed to an indoor existence for the rest of my days." He pauses, then confides



frustratedly, "I don't like sitting still, because it hurts, and I don't like walking, because it hurts."

"I have a solution," Astrid suggests. His eyebrow lifts suspiciously. "Flying." He rolls his eyes again. "Gobber says it'll get better," Astrid says, trying to be consoling.

"Yeah, well, if you don't mind, could we move on to a more pleasant topic than my personal woes?" Those eyebrows, contracting again. They're really too big for the rest of his face. The tone shuts down the conversation like a nanodragontrap.

"Sure."

That silence again. Hiccup breaks it, again.

"But I'm serious," he says, continuing a conversational thread that she must have forgotten about, because she stares at him blankly. Sometimes he does this, bringing things up from days or weeks or months ago, something that stuck in his brain that she has no memory of. "Did you just come over here to creep on my nap?"

She bites her lip and decides on the truth. "I like hanging out with your dad."

Hiccup's laugh is real, the first one she's heard from him all night. "Well, I can honestly say I've never heard anyone say \_that\_ before."

"He's not that bad," Astrid says immediately. "And it's nice to have someone to worry \_with\_ for a change. Usually I do it all by myself."

"Ah," Hiccup says knowingly, narrowing his eyes and nodding. "I see. Any more of this communal worrying and I'm going to have to do something stupid and crazy to warrant it all over again."

"Oh, I have no doubt you'll pull that off before the week is out."

"Astrid, it's Friday. There's only one day left in the week."

"My point."

"Ha-ha. You should quit your day job."

"My day job is school, doofus," she grins, bumping him with an elbow. "Speaking of, I've been thinking, you really should bring Toothless one of these days."

His eyes widen so much Astrid immediately vows to start writing these things down when she thinks of them, just to make sure she gets to see the reactions eventually. "\_What\_?"

"Bring Toothless to school," she suggests innocently. "Aww, come on. You'd get to hang out with him all day and freak out all the other kids with your awesome Night Fury, and the teachers? Never give you problems again."

Hiccup blows out his breath, still stupefied, but he does seem to

grasp that she's joking, now, at least. She sees ideas and concepts fly by behind his eyes, and a grin spreads on his face. "We'd go flying during lunch, just to see if we can send anyone into cardiac," he finally says, deadpan. "What could ever compel us to come back for fifth period?"

The teasing is interrupted by the doorbell. When Hiccup's whole face seems to squinch up at the prospect of rising, Astrid jumps as quickly as she can to her feet. "Coming!"

Stoick beats her to the door, carrying a long and heavy-looking cardboard box on a shoulder. He sets it down carefully leaning against the wall and swings the door open, sleet and hail swirling in hurriedly and sticking in his massive beard.

"Ah, Fred, knew you'd come," Stoick says cheerfully, as the man beyond the door shoots him a grin, safely ensconced in a weather-proof snow coat. They make a transfer, hot, wonderfully smelling food for a couple of tens, and Fred waves and disappears.

She helps him carry the food back to the kitchen, and unpacks the white, smiling "Thank you" bags while Stoick rummages through the cabinets for knives and forks.

For a moment, Astrid thinks Hiccup is dozing again, eyes closed and leaning back peacefully in his chair, hand resting on Toothless's slowly breathing shoulder, but once the food hits the table his eyes pop open and he sits up, excited.

Stoick sets down the silverware and goes to the fridge, and Astrid laughs out loud at the huge plastic bag of assorted fish that he rips open and leans on the wall in front of Toothless, who perks up and looks inquisitively toward them.

Stoick sits just as Toothless rises, makes sure that Hiccup's okay, and slinks over to his fish, starting to swallow them whole. Astrid almost wants to giggle at how complacent Stoick is — Stoick! He and the dragon, having dinner in the kitchen.

For a man, a boy, and a dragon, they actually have much better table manners than Astrid would have expected. Although Hiccup uses knife and fork to cut his chicken, Stoick uses his big fingers to eat the spare ribs and Astrid tries to find a ladylike way to fold the floppy boneless into her mouth without taking the time to cut it, something that Hiccup doesn't try very hard not to laugh at.

There are four fortune cookies, and Astrid wonders whether it's policy in the Haddock house to offer Toothless one, and she's relieved considerably when they don't touch the fourth. They open theirs in silence, and Astrid waits awkwardly for a moment before crushing open her own.

\_Stop searching forever. Happiness is just next to you.\_

A few months ago, Astrid would have scowled and torn the fortune to pieces. Now, though, she looks up at the happy, warm glow of the kitchen and slides it safely into her pocket.

Hiccup's face crinkles with annoyed amusement at his fortune, and he

sticks out his tongue as he angles it so she can see: \_A great pleasure in life is doing what others say you can't.\_ "No one ever told me I couldn't train a Night Fury," he shrugs, mock careless.

Stoick, on the other side of the table, is trying to hide the pride in his face, and he too shows Astrid his fortune: \_See if you can learn anything from the children.\_

Despite Astrid's steely glares, Hiccup does help with clearing the table, letting Stoick and Astrid clean forks and throw out Styrofoam plates while he repackages the leftovers to store in the refrigerator, and letting Toothless lick the pieces of his cookie ("I don't even like them,") out of his hand as Toothless watches them from the floor, more relaxed than she's ever seen him.

"I'm â€" I guess I'm just gonna go home," Astrid finally says, once all the food is put away or thrown out, the table is mostly wiped down, and Toothless is eyeing the one chunk of Hiccup's chicken that managed to escape the food disposal and fell on the floor. She glances at the hail and takes a deep breath, rolling her neck and trying to convince herself that she'll be just fine in her jacket.

"You're gonna go and bike home in \_that?\_" Hiccup's eyebrows rise straight to his hairline. "Uh, no. I'm not letting you go out there and have your parents blame me for pneumonia."

Stoick shakes his head. "No. When you go, I'll drive you, but it's only seven 'o clock, Astrid. Surely you don't have someplace to be?"

Astrid reluctantly admits that she doesn't, but now that Hiccup's awake, her prolonged presence is starting to feel uncomfortable.

Hand on Toothless's neck, Hiccup returns to the living room, perching carefully on the edge of the couch and feeling around for the remote to shut the silent TV. He stares blankly at the Food Network for a few seconds before pressing \_off\_ and abruptly fading it to black.

"Ummâ€|board games?" He suggests awkwardly. Even Stoick laughs at this as he leaves the room, and Hiccup is relieved that he won't have to explain to Astrid why the idea of playing Monopoly still gives him nightmares. Astrid carefully comes and sits on the other side of the couch, and they both stare at opposite sides of the room and wonder where Stoick is.

He reappears within moments, carrying that huge cardboard box that he'd left leaning on the wall next to the front door. This time, Astrid catches sight of the shiny picture printed on the side â€" an old-fashioned synthetic Christmas tree with multicolored lights.

She wants to run from the room. She wants to stay here and help. She wants to bike home quickly enough through the drenching hail that she'll think the heat is from exercise. She wants to laze on the couch beside Hiccup and watch Stoick put the tree together.

Neither Haddock seems aware at all of Astrid's plight, and Stoick

lets the end of the box fall with a thud between Hiccup's knees onto the edge of the couch. Obviously knowing what to do, Hiccup starts picking at the thick packing tape with his fingernails.

"Oh, move over," Astrid finally sighs, reaching into her sweater pocket and pulling out her switch, releasing it with a well-practiced pop of the button. Hiccup jumps and stares at her, but she slices through the tape evenly, then folds the knife back into the holster. "Get a grip on yourself," she tries to scoff, but his start had amused her. "Don't you remember I was a state champ for knife-throwing a year ago?"

"Oh, yeah. Must have slipped my mind. Not like I've had anything else going on in the past yearâ€¦" Suddenly they're both giggling, and Astrid watches as Stoick grips the bottom of the box and tugs it carefully away, leaving the three parts of the tree to fall to the ground.

Toothless helps by pushing the TV out of the way; no one explains to him that the cords aren't supposed to come out like that, but, as Stoick says with a chuckle, they don't watch much TV anyway.

Stoick sends Astrid to go look in the storage boxes in the attic for the tree skirt while he and Hiccup set up the base. She's given an old red flashlight to use to look, and despite the fact that the beam is more yellow than white and it's difficult to crawl through the attic while the wind seems to be trying to pry its way inside, Astrid has no trouble locating the one box that looks festive and lugging it down the stairs.

When she returns to the living room, it's to see Hiccup and Stoick both on the floor and Toothless standing up, looking down concernedly. Laughing, Astrid plops the plastic box on the couch and pries open the lid, finding the tree skirt right on the top and tossing it across the room, where it lands on Hiccup's head.

He gives her a thumbs up behind him and eases onto his elbows, fitting the top of the base through the hole and then spreading it around to hide the black metal bars. Stoick rises to a sitting position as well, lifting the first section of the tree with ease and plopping it on top of the base, hiding Hiccup's scrawny shoulders from view.

Astrid smiles and turns back to the box, taking out ornaments and laying them carefully out on the couch, Toothless watching the light reflecting off them suspiciously. When she's finished, the two of them have managed to construct the tree, and Hiccup is circling it, tilting his head and helping to adjust the branches so they fill out more.

"You know, everyone thinks you're so tough, Mr. Haddock, but you and Hiccup are just homebodies," Astrid teases. Stoick laughs, and Hiccup looks affronted until he realizes the ornaments are laid out.

His fingers are better at threading the green hooks onto the ornaments than hers or Stoick's, so they let him set them up and they hang them on the tree.

What with there being only one box of ornaments, the tree is a lot more green and Christmas lights than glass and gold, but it still

looks beautiful in their living room. Astrid turns back around to reach for the last ornament from Hiccup, who suddenly isn't there.

Spinning, she sees him sitting on Toothless's head as the dragon lifts him near the tree.

Carefully, Hiccup sticks a white dove high up the tree, just underneath the angel at the top. It's the highest ornament on the tree, and, as Astrid looks closer, she realizes it's not even that.

It looks exactly like a real bird, smooth with synthetic feathers and shiny plastic eyes that look up toward the top of the tree.

Astrid really, really doesn't want to ask what it means, and Stoick finally takes pity on her. "It's for Valhallarama," he explains in a voice Astrid hasn't heard since the hospital, and Astrid suddenly remembers how Hiccup's mom has been dead since they were infants. "She would have liked you a lot, Astrid." He gives her a smile.

"Do you do that every year?"

Hiccup nods.

\_That's so...perfect. So many things about...this are perfect.\_

"It's a shame she didn't get to see the two of them together," she says, gesturing at Hiccup and Toothless.

"It is. Every Christmas, we celebrate her memory. But this year, we have other things to celebrate as well." The look Stoick gives the three of them is so kind, she has a difficult time feeling embarrassed.

It's Hiccup who speaks next, the happiness in his voice so obvious it's almost incredible. "Yeah. We really do."

End  
file.